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ABSTRACT

For some time, the traditional stereotype of women which described them as gentle and dependent was considered normative and the concept that women were a unitary group dominated gender-role stereotype research. In contrast, the social cognitive approach described three subcategories of women: the housewife, the professional woman, and the sex object. Differences demonstrated between subcategories suggest that the traditional stereotypes cannot be normative as a whole. This study was conducted to test the hypothesis that all women are not expected to conform to the traditional female stereotype. Male and female college students read a character description about one of the subcategories of women and then rated what the character should do in situations representing maternal sensitivities, financial provider responsibilities, instrumental tendencies, interpersonal tendencies, and passivity. Subjects indicated that all women should be maternal but that women can differ in how they behave in other situations. (Author/NB)

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NORMATIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE ASPECTS OF SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

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Abstract

The traditional stereotype of women which described them as gentle and dependent was considered normative. The social cognitive approach has described subcategories of women: the housewife, professional woman, and Playboy bunny. The differences between subcategories suggests that the traditional stereotype cannot be normative. Subjects read a character description about one of the kinds of women and rated what she should do in situations representing maternal sensitivities, financial provider responsibilities, instrumental tendencies, interpersonal tendencies, and passivity. Subjects indicated that all women should be maternal but that women are allowed to differ in how they behave in the other situations.

NORMATIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE ASPECTS OF SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

Sex Roles

In the traditional approach to gender stereotypes, all women were described as similar. In their influential papers, the Brovermans and their colleagues (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz, 1972) described females by a cluster of traits such as gentle, religious, aware of the feelings of others, passive, dependent, and submissive. Those findings are consistent with the more mythic kind of cultural beliefs about women; that is, women are maternal and have the kindness and empathy to make the home a safe haven where the fires burn warmly.

In that literature, the total of the female stereotype was believed to be normative (Ruble & Ruble, 1982). It was believed that all females should exhibit feminine characteristics and that good mental health depended on learning and not deviating from the appropriate gender role (Broverman et al., 1972).

The concept that females are a unitary group has dominated gender-role stereotype research until recently when it has become clear that not all women are perceived to be alike. The social cognitive approach has described three subcategories of women: the housewife, the professional woman, and the sex object (Clifton, McGrath, & Wick, 1976; Deaux, Winton, Crowley, & Lewis, 1985; England & Hyland, 1984; Noseworthy & Lott, 1984). The housewife is understanding and helpful, and has the other characteristics which are important in dealing with her family. Behaviors ascribed to her have to do with the Boy Scouts and dinner. The professional woman has the

characteristics necessary for success in the work world. She is well-spoken, competitive, and she fires employees. The Playboy bunny is the sex-object. Her major focus is on appealing to the opposite sex, and she is flirtatious and does not button the top two buttons of her blouse (England & Hyland, 1984).

The demonstrated differences between subcategories suggest that the traditional stereotypes cannot be normative as a whole (Emerich, 1973; Turner, 1982). It may be that females are expected to exhibit only a small subset of the characteristics described by the stereotype, and that characteristics not included in that subset would be a matter of individual differences with some women exhibiting them and with others exhibiting them only weakly, if at all.

The purpose of the present research was to test the hypothesis that all women are not expected to conform to the traditional female stereotype. Several aspects of both the traditional and nontraditional female gender role were studied: maternal sensitivities, financial provider responsibilities, interpersonal tendencies, instrumental tendencies, and passivity. It was predicted that subjects would expect all females to be maternal (Russo, 1979). It was further predicted that the other aspects of the gender role are not normative, and therefore, subjects would indicate that women from the different subcategories should differ in the financial provider, interpersonal, instrumental, and passivity role characteristics.

Method

Subjects were female and male college students. They read a character description of an individual category member, either a housewife, a professional woman, a bunny, or the woman in general who represents all women. They then made judgments about what that

individual should do in various situations which represented the role characteristics. Each role characteristic was represented by four different situations which would require an individual to use the characteristic of interest. Each situation was followed by three responses that a woman could make. One response was of good quality, one was of moderate quality, and one was of poor quality. Subjects rated each response on a scale from one, "definitely should not make this response" to seven "definitely should make this response." For example, in one situation which represents maternal sensitivities, the woman has walked into a room which is empty except for a crying baby. Subjects judged whether she should pick up the baby and sing to it (high quality), look in the next room for its mother (moderate quality), or sit in a chair on the opposite side of the room (poor quality).

Results

Only in the passive situations were all categories of women expected make poor rather than good quality responses. Poor quality passive responses actually indicate assertive behavior. To state the positive case, subjects believe that women should be more assertive than passive. For the analyses, the good and poor quality responses were reversed. The assertive responses (poor quality passive) became the good quality responses, and the passive responses (good quality passive) became the poor quality responses.

With these reversals, the three-way interaction between category of women, role characteristic and quality of response was significant, F (32, 174) = 2.04, $p < .01$. The three-way interaction was probed by looking at the different levels of the quality of response factor. Separate 4 (category of women) X 5 (role characteristic) X 4

(situation example) X 19 (subjects) ANOVAS were performed on the good, moderate, and poor quality levels. In each case, the two-way interaction between category and role characteristic was significant, F (17, 99) = 2.36, $p < .01$ (see Figure 1), F (20, 99) = 1.90, $p < .05$ (see Figure 2), and F (15, 99) = 3.29, $p < .01$ (see Figure 3), respectively.

Four (category of women) X 4 (situation example) X 19 (subjects) ANOVAS were performed on each of the five role characteristics. Where appropriate, Newman-Keuls post hoc tests were conducted to determine which categories of women were significantly different from the others.

Maternal Sensitivities. For high quality responses, the main effect for category was not significant, F (4, 116) = 1.49, $p > .05$, supporting the prediction that subjects believe that the different kinds of women should not act differently in maternal situations. The means are relatively high, indicating that subjects believed all women should be maternal.

One would expect that norms which prescribe expected behavior also include proscriptions against acting badly. It is logical that included in the beliefs that all women should be maternal is the belief that no women should act in nonmaternal ways. It was predicted that subjects would indicate that no woman should make poor quality maternal responses. Contrary to predictions, the main effect for category of women was significant, F (3, 116) = 3.73, $p < .05$. Newman-Keuls indicated that there are stronger prohibitions against the housewife than against the bunny ($p < .05$) for acting poorly.

Financial Provider Responsibilities. For the high quality responses, the main effect was significant, F (3, 116) = 4.83,

$p < .01$. The Newman-Keuls indicated that the professional woman was expected to take her financial provider responsibilities more seriously than either the bunny or the housewife ($p < .05$). The main effect was also signficant for low quality responses, F (3, 116) = 4.68, $p < .01$. Subjects had stronger prohibitions against the professional woman and the housewife for behaving poorly than they did against the bunny ($p < .01$).

Interpersonal tendencies. The main effect for category was significant for both high, F (3, 116) = 3.48, $p < .05$, and low, F (4, 116) = 2.48, $p < .05$, quality responses. However, in both cases Newman-Keuls tests did not reach significance indicating that the differences are weak.

Instrumental tendencies. There was a significant difference between categories for high quality, F (3, 116) = 6.86, $p < .01$, and for low quality, F (3, 116) = 7.86, $p < .01$, responses. The professional woman was expected to be more instrumental than the bunny ($p < .01$). Further, the housewife, the professional woman, and the woman in general were prohibited from acting poorly in situations requiring instrumental responses while the bunny was not ($p < .01$).

Assertiveness. The main effect for category was significant for high, F (3, 116) = 3.75, $p < .05$, for moderate, F (4, 116) = 3.32, $p < .05$, and for low, F (3, 116) = 3.98, $p < .01$, quality responses. Post hoc tests were significant only for the low quality responses. The professional woman is more strongly prohibited from lacking assertiveness than both the housewife and the bunny, ($p < .01$).

Discussion

This research provides a richer understanding of the stereotyping of women. Only with respect to children were all women expected to

show strong positive behavior. That is, it remains a social standard that all women must be maternal. In contrast to the traditional view, all women are expected to be more assertive than passive, and not all women are expected to be equally interpersonal. Also in contrast to the traditional view which indicated that no woman was expected to be instrumental, the professional woman is expected to take her job seriously and to have the agency to pursue that job effectively.

From the perspective of how the role characteristics are organized within women, the evidence suggests that perceivers expect members of each subcategory display a different configuration of characteristics and to behave according to those characteristics. Subjects perceived the professional woman to be a capable, dynamic individual. She is expected to possess the characteristics thought necessary for men to be effective breadwinners for the family. However, she does not simply copy the male expression of the role. For males, professionalism is usually considered antithetical to human concerns, but the female professional is expected to be sensitive to the emotional and psychological aspects of human interactions. She closely fits the popular image of a <u>superwoman</u> since in neither work nor family is she expected to act badly.

The housewife is closely aligned to the traditional stereotype of women, and it would be reasonable to hypothesize that subjects might expect such women to be more maternal than women in the other subcategories, to be highly sensitive to the emotional and psychological aspects of a situation, and to be passive--that is, to live up to the traditional stereotype. However, subjects did not expect the housewife to be a highly representative example of the stereotype. For the role characteristics investigated, she is simply

a moderate woman.

Overall, subjects neither expected much from the bunny nor had strong prohibitions against her acting badly. The findings are consistent with the image that she is focused on herself and her attractiveness to men (England & Hyland, 1986). On the other hand she was expected to be more assertive than passive in the kinds of situations investigated in this experiment. None of these situations involved interactions with men who are the central focus of her life so it is unknown whether she is expected to maintain this assertiveness in the relationships with them. Since there are no strong prohibitions against her also making passive responses, it may be that passivity is allowed in her relations with men.

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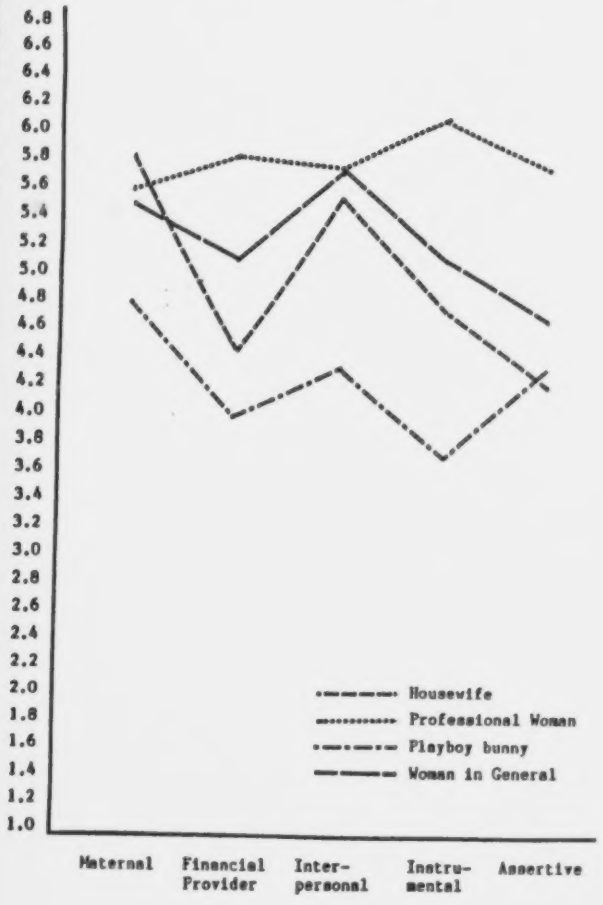

Figure 1: Good Quality Responses

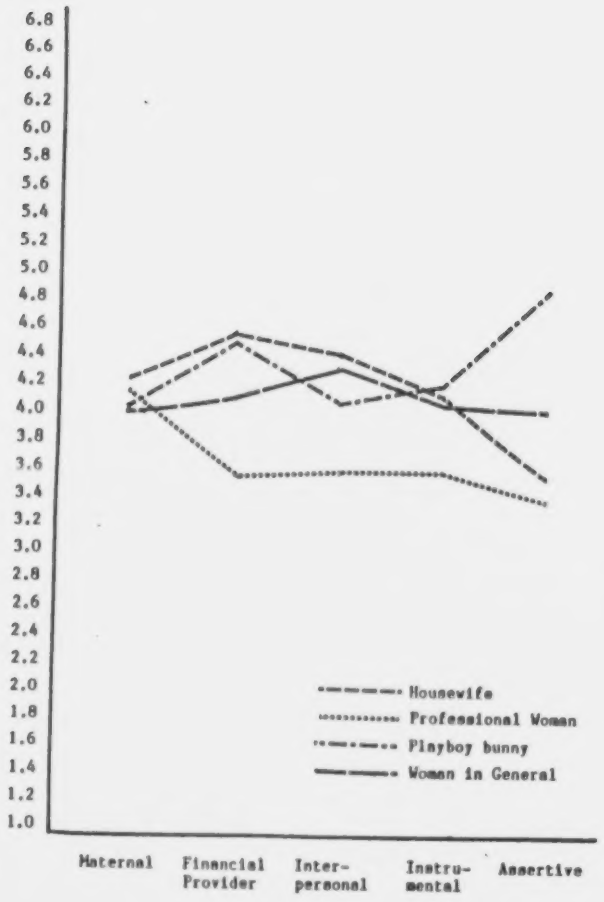

Figure 2: Moderate Quality Responses

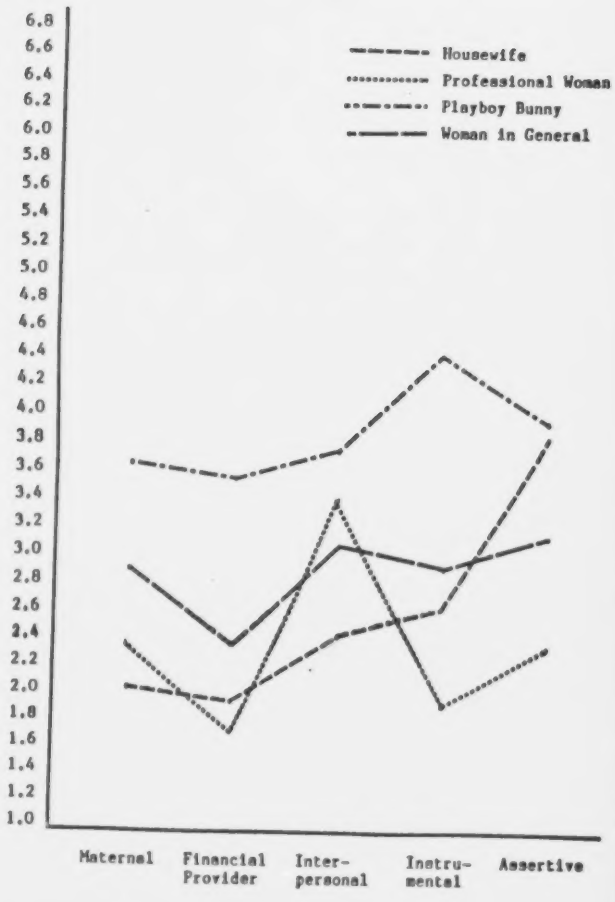

Figure 3: Poor Quality Responses

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